

## **PLANNING FOR QUALITY GROWTH: BUILDING BETTER COMMUNITIES**

America's population is growing, creating demand for new housing and an expanded transportation infrastructure. As Americans address the challenges associated with community growth, we should continue to emphasize development that preserves each person's right to choose where to live and how to travel. When local leaders plan for quality growth, they help build better communities.

# PLANNING FOR QUALITY GROWTH: BUILDING BETTER COMMUNITIES

## Background

People living in growing communities are benefiting from the many by-products of growth. Growth in suburban areas often is the result of new businesses and new jobs, producing a larger tax base and a stronger local economy. Growth in communities also provides individuals with more choices for shopping, dining, daycare, health care, recreation, and entertainment. There is a general feeling of progress driven by newcomers finding homes, schools, and jobs to improve their quality of life. A recent poll indicates that nearly three-quarters of Americans agree that growth, when managed properly, is good for the community.

People choose where they live based on the perception of good schools and safe streets. However, if not addressed effectively, increased traffic congestion, high rates of crime, crowded schools, and less open space can adversely affect citizens' quality of life. Consequently, people across the nation are debating what to do about future growth in their communities.

Some want to accommodate growth by providing necessary public infrastructure—roads, schools, water and sewer systems, and so forth—and developing a comprehensive plan to preserve open space and maintain local aesthetic values. Others want to slow or stop growth entirely by limiting the number of building permits, drawing growth boundaries to prevent development outside the lines, and rejecting new road capacity that is necessary to accommodate new residential or commercial development.

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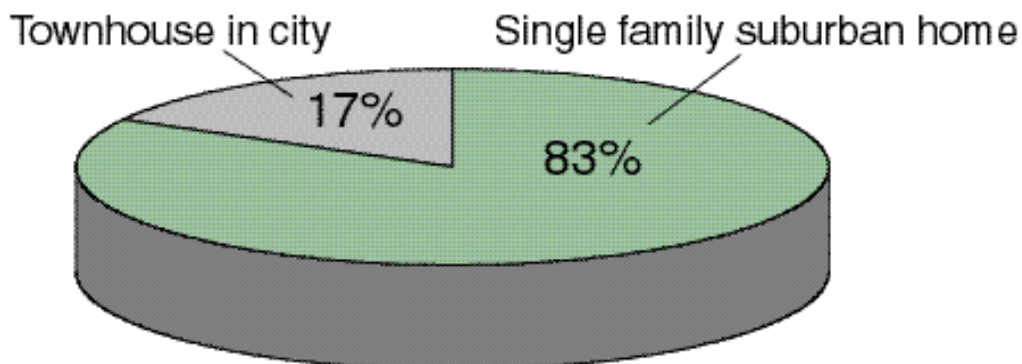
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## The Myth

Adopting restrictions on growth to curb new development and foster high-density residential and work

zones will create a more livable community by reducing traffic congestion, providing more desirable housing, preserving open spaces, and lowering the cost of public services and infrastructure. High-density development, by making transit, bicycling, and walking more viable alternatives to driving, will reduce traffic congestion.

## Americans Prefer Single Family Suburban Homes



Source: National Association of Home Builders

## The Facts

**America's population is growing, creating demand for new housing and an expanded transportation infrastructure.**

- Growth boundaries and other restrictions that limit development to areas where infrastructure already exists will severely curtail citizens' freedom to choose where they live and which mode of transportation they can use.
- The United States will need about 1.5 million new homes each year for the next decade to accommodate increases in population, according to the National Association of Home Builders (1999).
- In a nationwide survey by the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), 83 percent of respondents said they would prefer a detached, single-family home in the suburbs instead of an equally priced townhouse in the city, even though the suburban home would entail longer distances to work, shopping, and public transportation.
- With a projected U.S. population increase of 60 million during the next 25 years, total travel also is expected to rise significantly, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (1990) and the U.S. Department of Transportation. The best way to accommodate travel increases without greater traffic congestion is to expand and improve all components of transportation systems.
- While growth boundaries or prohibitions against new construction may prevent development, thus preserving open space in particular areas, it is important to note that residential and commercial growth are fluid. If stopped in one place, growth will occur somewhere else. David Schulz (1998), a professor at Northwestern University, in comments made to the *Chicago Tribune*, concluded that inadequate road facilities in the developed areas of Chicago's suburbs has led to "hyper-sprawl" or noncontiguous, leap-frog growth.

**Growth boundaries and similar policies, which aim to increase a city's**

**population density by artificially limiting the supply of developable land, tend to increase housing costs.**

- The nation's 25 most affordable housing markets have an average population of 1,260 people per square mile, while the 25 most expensive housing markets have an average density that is three times as high—3,170 people per square mile—according to NAHB's housing-affordability index.
- Disproportionate shares of the nation's least-affordable housing markets are in Oregon, where growth boundaries have been in effect for more than 20 years. Rapid population growth may account for some of the increased housing costs in Portland, Eugene, Salem, and Medford, but other fast-growing cities, such as Denver, Las Vegas, and Phoenix, are not included among the nation's most expensive housing markets. The NAHB index shows that the artificial shortage of land created by Oregon's growth boundaries has made home ownership unaffordable for some residents.

**Environmental improvement and economic development can work together to enhance our nation's quality of life.**

- Building better communities means meeting human needs for natural resources, industrial products, energy, food, transportation, shelter, and effective waste management while improving environmental quality and conserving natural resources essential to future development.
- Economic competition drives companies to produce high-quality products using fewer raw materials, resulting in better management of our nation's resources.

**Additional road capacity is a necessary part of a comprehensive plan to reduce traffic congestion in growing areas.**

- An analysis of the Texas Transportation Institute's (1999) annual study of traffic congestion in the nation's 68 largest cities indicates a significant correlation between increased urban density and higher levels of traffic congestion. As population increases, additional road capac-

ity and other measures are needed to avoid increased congestion.

- Regardless of density, driving accounts for more than 80 percent of commuter trips in every urban area of the United States except New York City, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation.
- The best way to relieve traffic congestion is through long-term regional planning that includes a variety of measures, such as computerized traffic signals, programs to expedite the removal of stalled cars and other roadway obstructions, construction of more turn lanes and new roads where needed, and improved safety and efficiency of transit.
- While traffic congestion is worsening across the country, according to the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI), cities that have aggressively added road capacity in response to regional growth have had smaller increases in congestion than have other areas.

## Our Position

America's population is growing, creating demand for new housing and an expanded transportation infrastructure. As Americans address the challenges associated with community growth, we should continue to emphasize development that preserves each person's right to choose where to live and how to travel.

Effective community development should take into account the type of open spaces, transportation facilities, housing, and commercial space desired by local citizens. Results of a

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NAHB (1999) survey showed that Americans strongly prefer to live in detached, single-family homes with easy access to highways and neighborhood parks. The survey shows that the public adamantly rejects higher density development plans currently being implemented in certain parts of the country as solutions to growth issues. Those attitudes must be taken into account at all levels, especially at the local level where planning decisions should take place.

Efforts to regulate the pace and geographic scope of development in a community

should be tempered with an understanding of the impact that zoning and growth restrictions or inadequate road capacity can have on housing, prices, and traffic congestion. It is important to ensure that future generations will be able to pursue the American dream of affordable home ownership.

### Endnotes

National Association of Home Builders. (1999). *Housing Opportunity Index, First Quarter 1999*. <[www.nahb.com](http://www.nahb.com)>.

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